The Rhythm of the Rake and the Shape of Grief

July 21st, 1966

The rhythm of the work was its own music

The morning rose easy over the hayfield, the kind of day that arrives without fuss. The sun was warm on our backs and the breeze was light as a blessing, the world turning in its old, familiar rhythm. The hay had been cut earlier in the week, lying dry and sweet on the ground, waiting for hands to lift it into the small summer stacks that kept it safe from whatever weather might wander in.

It was work, yes, but the kind that carried laughter in its pockets.

We were all there:

- **Sheamus.**
- **Me - wee Owen.**
- **My Granda Owen.**
- **And Corny Cunn, the neighbour whose family seemed to move in step with ours.**

Two houses with the same heartbeat. Neighbours in the old sense, the kind who arrived without being asked, because time and weather ruled the land more than any man did. I'd often heard it said that my Granda had "great time" for the Cunns.

Corny's youngest daughter Eilish came too, dark-haired, a sparkle in her eyes, full of the kind of fun that lifts a field. She was eleven months older than me, born on the very day my parents married, 25th August 1953. I felt the quiet delight of having someone my own age beside me, someone who matched my stride, someone who made the work feel like play. It was the first day I remember her clearly, not knowing that within a few summers she would become my first girlfriend, and a friend for the whole of my life.

The Music of the Work

The field was a happy place that day - sunshine, the fresh green smell of drying hay, a slight breeze that cooled whatever needed cooling. Hard work if you leaned into it, gentle work if you didn't. Me and Eilish took turns with the big wooden rake, gathering the stray wisps that had blown off course. A few of the pegs were broken, replaced with small whittled branches, repairs made by hands that understood the value of things.

The adults worked with sharp two-pronged pitchforks, lifting and placing the hay with a skill that looked like instinct. When a stack reached its right height, they dressed it down, smoothing it like a barber tending a head of hair, so the rain, if it came, would slide off harmlessly.

The mood in the field was light-hearted, threaded with kindness, friends all in it together, working in harmony. There was gentle craic, a few stories shared, light local gossip, praise about the quality of the hay, and teasing that carried no sting. The rhythm of the work was its own music, pitchforks rising and falling like a slow dance.

Ben, the border collie, lay in the shade of the last stack we'd made, paws stretched forward, head resting easy, eyes alert and following every move, ready to shift with us to the next stack, staying close in case there was work for him too. Beside the hedge stood a white enamel bucket, full of cool spring water drawn from the well, our guard against the *druth*, the thirst of summer labour. Its rim caught the sunlight, a small bright circle in the yellow-green of the field.

Everything felt ordinary, the kind of ordinary that holds its own quiet perfection.

The Rake Sang Low

The rake sang low through summer air,
its wooden teeth in gentle tune
each stroke a measure, light and fair,
beneath the mercy of the noon.
Pitchforks rose like fiddlers' bows,
the hay a choir, the breeze a drum;
and laughter, soft as clover grows,
kept time until the day was done. – Éireál

The Ritual of the Pipe

When the sun climbed high enough, Annie, my godmother, came across the field with the dinner. Cidona bottles wrapped in the *Derry Journal*, filled with strong tea already sweetened with milk and sugar. Ham sandwitches, scone bread buttered thick, and jam for me - I never took to the country butter. She was the woman of the house since Granny died too young, two years before. Annie joined us with fresh chat. We sat with our backs against the hay we'd lifted, the field warm around us, the food tasting better than any feast. Eilish sat beside me, by now a firm friend and the talk drifted easy in the summer air.

After the dinner, when the chat had thinned and the warmth of the tea still held our hands, Granda and Corny reached into their pockets with the same slow certainty I'd watched for years. Out came the Walnut Plug, dark, solid, smelling of earth and evenings, a hard block of tobacco that needed a man's patience.

Granda took out his penknife, the blade sharpened thin from a lifetime of small, necessary work, and cut a neat slice from the plug, the shavings falling like curled brown petals onto his palm. Sheamus, quicker by nature, had his packet of Sweet Afton out, a cigarette lit and half-finished before the older men were even ready to strike a match. He smoked with the ease of youth, while Granda and Corny worked at their ritual, cutting, rubbing, crumbling the tobacco between their palms, the slow rhythm of men who'd learned patience from the land itself.

Sometimes they'd stop mid-rub or mid-pack when a bit of talk turned serious, some news from the town, a neighbour's sheep, a story worth the pause. Then, when the words were done, the hands would start again, steady and sure, as if the tobacco had been waiting for them to finish. When the pipes were packed and tamped, the matches struck, and the first draw taken, a quiet satisfaction settled over their faces. The smoke drifted blue and slow, and the day seemed to breathe with them.

Granda spat, a neat, practiced flick through the gap in his long pale brown bottom teeth, the spit landing true some distance away. It wasn't rude; it was just the way of it, a Donegal skill I envied. I watched it all, took it in; these were skills I needed to know about in case I ever had to smoke a pipe.

For a while, the field held nothing but the soft drift of smoke, the murmur of men at peace, and the steady heartbeat of a summer day that had not yet broken. And we readied ourselves to go back to the work. There wasn't a cloud in the sky.

The Cloud Down the Field

There wasn't a cloud in the sky, but a black cloud came down the field all the same. News travelled whatever way it could then, carried by whoever had a car, a good tractor, or in this case a motorbike coming from the post office five miles away where the only phone in the townland lived. Pat-the-Post came straight to my Granda, and the field fell still. Uncle Owen, my Granda's son, Sheamus's brother had died in Birmingham. Thirty-eight years old.

The adults blessed themselves. And without a word spoken between them, Corny Cunn stepped forward, the neighbour, the friend, the steady man of the field knelt down first, cap lifted from his head, as if the weight of the news had pressed him to the earth. Granda and Sheamus followed, their grief folding them down beside him.

I can't remember if we children knelt, but I think we did, copying the shape of the moment, feeling the sudden sadness settle over the day like a shadow that had been waiting at the edge of the field.

Corny led a few prayers, his voice low and sure, threading the silence with the old words that held families together in times like this. He wasn't too well himself that summer, the news of my Uncle Owen hit him hard.

Corny died three months later, in October age 58. A modest man, a good man, known as such by all who ever stood in his company.

The two children then, the sole survivors from that day's congregation, we remember them all - our own people, who shared that field and that life with us.

The rest of that afternoon blurred, as if the sun dimmed and the field forgot its laughter.

All I know is this: July 21st, 1966 began as a perfect day, and ended as the day my Uncle Owen died, the day grief laid its hand on us all.

'He didn't bring a prayer book. Just a cap lifted in the sun. Which was a prayer in itself.' - Éireál